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ABSTRACT

Service-learning places students and educational institutions in direct contact with surrounding communities, teaches them greater appreciation for persons of different social privileges, and helps them to recognize the necessity of social intervention in distributing the benefits of democracy. Service-learning is inherently democratizing by combating the separation of higher education from its beneficiaries, and by avoiding the social stratification that new technologies can bring. Including a service component in education can offset the individualistic focus of technologized learning and encourages students to take responsibility for how they and their classmates learn. Contains 5 references. (EF)

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Teching Down Without Copping Out: Service-Learning as a Counter to Technological Elitism

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Teching Down Without Copping Out: Service-Learning as a Counter to Technological Elitism

A sizable body of literature chronicles the democratizing nature of service-learning (Lisman, 1998; Eyler and Giles, 1999) in the sense that participation is open to anyone willing to serve. Through their collaboration not only with other students, but with diverse populations in the community beyond the college environment, students develop greater appreciation for people who do not enjoy a full range of social privileges. Perhaps more importantly, students begin to recognize that active intervention in public affairs may be necessary to help others reap the benefits of democracy. As a counter to ivory tower intellectualism, service-learning places students and educational institutions in direct contact with surrounding communities.

In another sense, service-learning is inherently democratizing apart from combating the mandarin separation of higher education from its beneficiaries. Service-learning is the quintessential low-technology program. The students, bearing knowledge, skills, and concern, propagate educational missions directly to populations that might not notice or have become jaded with the abstract mission statements of institutions. Aside from efficient low-tech outreach, service-learning also counters the growing temptation to rely on technology to improve educational experiences for the students. Lisman (1998) somewhat cynically identifies drives toward technologies such as distance education and computer-based instruction as signs of instrumental reasoning in education (p. 66). According to Lisman, these sorts of technologies are essentially scalable investments, allowing institutions to economize by having burgeoning enrollments with the fewest possible faculty hires and direct contact hours. This economizing reduces

student-faculty collaborations in learning by attenuating face-to-face contact and personal involvement with student learning. Service-learning, while labor-intensive, could restore the student-faculty partnership in learning by involving everyone as a learner from their contributions to the community.

A vast armada of expensive high-tech gadgetry is being imported into classrooms and employed as adjuncts to—and sometimes replacements for—teaching. While equipment such as live Internet feeds, interactive tests, and read-write CDs can increase student interest and perhaps enhance student satisfaction with a course, no innovative instructional delivery method can substitute for direct student experience. Granted, students could not be expected to experience all course-related events directly. For example, a public speaking class could not attend an off-site speech delivered during class time. In this situation, a live video feed to the class could allow the speech to be viewed and discussed. But even here, the students witness only the finished product. How much more instructive it would be if students could operate behind the scenes with, for example, voter registration drives to craft messages and adapt them to communities with low voter turnout. Service-learning affords students opportunities to participate in the creation and revision of communication rather than settle for being spectators of a final version of discourse whose developmental history remains a mystery.

In contrast to technological innovations that help bring material to the students, service-learning brings the students to venues where their subject matter is being practiced, not just studied. One of our students, a sophomore majoring in communication, performed an internship with a local chapter of Planned Parenthood that had suffered from severe funding pressures and chronic understaffing. The student

specialized in crafting prevention messages regarding pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases targeted to college students. She found that her preparation of text for brochures, decisions on where to place materials, and delivery of public service spots on the radio taught her far more than all her courses that required delivering speeches to the same homogeneous group of listeners who had no stake in the speech topic.

The danger in becoming too reliant on technology to deliver instruction is that it might encourage intellectual passivity, with students operating on the principle of least effort and confidently assuming that the course materials will be brought to them. It is important not to equate easier access to course material with a wider range of available experience. Regardless of the fidelity virtual experiences have to lived praxis, students who interact with technology rather than humans never would confront the variables operable in interpersonal interactions. Despite the value of being technologically savvy, the ability to negotiate with different sorts of people and navigate amid personality conflicts, political agendas, and the like surely remain more valuable skills than the ability to navigate through a series of menu bars and hyperlinks.

Service-learning, which by nature encourages participation from as many students as possible, also avoids the social stratification that new technologies can bring. As Warnick (1999) explains, women were initially induced to go online in the mid-1990s in terms that simultaneously alarmed them about the technology's dangers (e.g., harassment in chat rooms, molestations and rapes resulting from online meetings) while stigmatizing them for their technological ignorance when compared to men. Indeed, technological innovations almost by definition further stratify society because the technologies are initially expensive, so only the wealthy can afford them. Such stratification holds for

educational institutions as well as individuals, with the wealthier institutions infusing technologies much earlier and much deeper into their curriculum than the "have-nots." Service-learning, to the contrary, might require a substantial financial commitment, but the benefit is limited primarily by the willingness to engage in a commitment to serve. The research on service-learning reports no systematic or widespread differences in the perceived quality of service-learning that correlate with gender, race, or economic status. Students who do report negative experiences with service-learning tend to identify problems in the administration of the program as a bad fit with the community group in which they were placed (Eyler and Giles, 1999). There is also some evidence that students who engage in service-learning could become more reflective about their own class status and begin to question the reasons for class stratification and social privilege (McEwen, 1996).

Putnam (1996) suggests that technological innovations contribute to social fragmentation. He points the finger at television. If nothing else, television usurps time that could be spent in group activities or conversations. But other media, including the Internet, also demonstrate this isolationist effect. The image of a lone student glued to the computer screen has become an icon of how the idealized global village has shrunk into global cubicles.

Before educators jump on the bandwagon of online coursework and similar technologies, it might be wise to consider how these novelties affect student perceptions of their obligations to each other. The authors recall a situation a few years ago that raises concern. One of us had to be out of town for a professional convention. Not willing to cancel class, a videotape version of the day's material was shown. The

teaching assistant who screened the video reported that the situation was chaotic. An auditorium of 120 students who were ordinarily courteous and friendly turned into an unruly mob. Some students talked throughout the video, a behavior they never would exhibit in a live class. Several students wandered throughout the room, blocking the view of the screen. Other students brought dinner and feasted rather than take notes. Throughout the video, students entered and departed at will, apparently oblivious to the distraction these disruptions caused.

These students were reasonably mature adults, so they should have outgrown the "When the cat's way, the mice will play" syndrome. As many students reported later, although the video lecture was announced beforehand, they were unprepared for its depersonalizing effect. The students' behavior, however, demonstrated something more disturbing. Apparently they were unwilling to recognize their obligation not to distract each other. Thus the civility in the everyday classroom was not generalized to other contexts, and the class degenerated into bedlam without the presence of someone to remind them of the need for courtesy.

While technological innovations might not turn an attentive class into an angry mob, they do change the relational dynamics of the classroom. Rather than engage each other in questions and conversation, attention shifts to the screen (television or computer). Without the checks and balances of teachers and students regulating what is deemed appropriate, the civilizing effect of education suffers. Behaviors that might be normal when watching television alone do not always transfer to social settings. Including a service component in education can offset the individualistic focus of technologized learning. With service-learning, students discover that they are responsible

not only for allowing their classmates to learn, but that they shoulder responsibility for taking part in accomplishing concrete tasks associated with their studies. The passive ethic of non-interference converts to more active involvement in testing theories discussed in the classroom.

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